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A Summer Mini-Series: Paul Said *That??* 2. Even *Us?*

Romans 12:1-8 NRSV I appeal to you therefore, brothers and sisters, by the mercies of God, to present your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God, which is your spiritual worship. 2 Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your minds, so that you may discern what is the will of God-what is good and acceptable and perfect. 3 For by the grace given to me I say to everyone among you not to think of yourself more highly than you ought to think, but to think with sober judgment, each according to the measure of faith that God has assigned. 4 For as in one body we have many members, and not all the members have the same function, 5 so we, who are many, are one body in Christ, and individually we are members one of another. 6 We have gifts that differ according to the grace given to us: prophecy, in proportion to faith; 7 ministry, in ministering; the teacher, in teaching; 8 the exhorter, in exhortation; the giver, in generosity; the leader, in diligence; the compassionate, in cheerfulness.

Have I told you this story before? It's one I always think of whenever I hear or read a scripture that talks about "gifts." It was Christmas-time many years ago. I had gutted it up and gone to the mall (remember when people went to the mall?) to do some shopping. It was crowded and the place was full of those kiosks that pop up during the shopping season to sell you cell phones, beef jerky, and over-priced candy. The sign on one of those kiosks caught my eye: "*Ears pierced.*" Okay, hardly anything novel about that, but then the second line of the sign had me scratching my head. "*Ears Pierced. **While you wait.***" Hmmmmm.... I started wondering about what the alternative might be to waiting while the procedure was done on you. Were there folks who thought that somehow it could be magically done when they weren't physically present? But underneath that sign was another, handwritten sign that announced another come-on in case you were vacillating about whether or not to get your ears pierced. That handwritten sign said "*Special! Today only! Free Gift! Second pair of ears no charge!*" That pre-Christmas crowd at the mall was quite diverse in all kinds of ways, but I didn't see anyone there who had more than the standard-issue one pair of

ears. Maybe I was just going to the mall at the wrong time.

Free gifts. It is the subject of our scripture today from the Apostle Paul, the final in our sermon mini-series. And while last week's sermon was about "them," this week's topic is what Paul has to say about "us." In these verses, Paul ends by talking about the "free gifts" that God has given every person. He names quite a list of aptitudes, traits, and talents that are to be understood as God-given gifts: exhortation (or the ability to persuade folks), teaching, ministering, giving, leading, compassion, and prophecy (which is better understood as the ability to wisely understand what is going on and interpret a situation). And his list is not exhaustive, it's only meant as examples and his first point is that everyone has been given some sort of gift or talent or aptitude. Everyone. You aren't off the hook if your gift isn't on his list. Preacher Edward Markquart rightly reminds us that your gifts

...are your talents, abilities, aptitudes, events that have happened to you. These have shaped you, your family, your health, your everything. Your gifts are the sum total of all the resources that God has given to you. Your gifts are not just genetic abilities and natural aptitudes, although these are part of your gifts. Many of your most precious gifts are qualities and resources that have been developed in you over time

and "God is enormously generous with each one of us."¹ Nor will Paul let you off the hook with either false modesty or unwarranted conceit. As former Disciples of Christ General Minister and President Dick Hamm once said, "True modesty is owning your gifts (for, after all, they are from God) ; false modesty is denying them (and therefore denying God); and conceit is overestimating your gifts."²

¹ http://www.sermonsfromseattle.com/series_c_discovering.htm

² Adapted from remarks by Richard L. Hamm, presentation to the College of Regional Ministers of the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ), December 5, 1999, New Orleans, Louisiana. Dr. Hamm actually used "talents" instead of "gifts," and the parenthetical material is adapted from Rev. Barbara Blaisdell's suggestion.

But let's work backwards through our scripture today, and ask "**Why** has God given each person gifts?" Well, Paul's answer to that question, and the second point I want to highlight this morning, is that such gifts are never, ever simply given for self-aggrandizement. Every God-given gift is always for the purpose of building up the body, building up the church for its mission of sharing with a needy and hurting world the Good News of a God of everlasting love for each and all and Whose love will not be defeated even by death. Throughout his writings Paul has no patience for those who would spend their time dividing into factions or squabbling about who was more important or who would put their personal preferences ahead of the need of those who don't know God. The church is never, ever about the satisfaction of my personal preferences, the church is never ever a place that exists simply to "meet my needs." That is the consumerist heresy of our age and Paul anticipated it and was fighting against it when he said we are members of each other, bound to each other through a common calling to offer hope to the world, none of us more important than that mission that God has placed upon us as those who are now Christ's body in this world.

So, if Paul's first point in this short but complex scripture is that everyone has been given gifts by God, and his second point is that those gifts are always meant for the upbuilding of the church and reaching out to those who don't know of God's love, what's his third point? Well, again, working backwards, let's now look at the beginning of this scripture. There is an enormous amount going on in these first two verses; let's hear them again: *"I appeal to you therefore, brothers and sisters, by the mercies of God, to present your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God, which is your spiritual worship. Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your minds, so that you may discern what is the will of God-what is good and acceptable and perfect."* What is Paul saying here?

Well, and this is the third point I think he's making, I believe he is pointing out

that there is to be no unhelpful distinction between mind and body. In some ways it sounds like a startling claim; did you notice: He says ***the way you worship spiritually, the way you exercise your spiritual gifts, has everything to do with where you put and what you do with your body.*** This is crucial, my friends, because throughout Christian history, from its earliest days and down to this day, there have been those who have wanted to say that faith has little or nothing to do with the messy, complicated, complex fact that we are embodied creatures living with other embodied creatures. Paul is saying no, the condition of our bodies is just as much God's concern as the condition of our souls. Paul is saying that you can't separate mind and body, spirit and soul like that; they always go together. But why is that important, why is that so crucial?

Well, one of the earliest perversions of the gospel – which in fact began to arise in Paul's time – was the claim that Jesus wasn't really human and that he only appeared to be so, and thus that his earthly life was not real in the same way that your life and mine are. But the scary corollary of that point of view quickly came to be that therefore God doesn't really care about our messy, complicated, complex all-too-human lives for we are "really" only "spiritual" creatures who happen to have bodies that don't mean anything. And from there it wasn't too far of a slide to say that God, therefore, doesn't really care about the suffering that happens to human beings because the only thing that is real is our "spiritual" selves and their ultimate destination in the next life. But Paul's seemingly curious claim that it is indeed in fact our bodies that ARE our spiritual worship is his way of saying a resounding "No!" to that point of view. For such a view makes it all too easy for us to not care about the plight of our neighbors and to delude and anesthetize ourselves to their suffering as being somehow illusory, something we don't need to care about.

Paul is saying that if you are to truly worship God with all the gifts that God has

given you – gifts that always have to do with your body and its capabilities – then it matters, it truly and crucially matters “where” you put your bodies. It **matters**, as author Ta-Nehisi Coates in his latest book has so brilliantly and beautifully and terribly pointed out,³ that the down to this day we have a system of institutionalized racism whose practices and even laws too often put African-American bodies at risk. It **matters** that a woman should never ever be told that the boundaries of her body and whom she shares her body with are not hers to choose, nor should her body should ever be subject to abuse because of the whims of men or the perversion of a verse or two of scripture. Because our spiritual worship of God always has to do with respecting people’s bodies, it **matters** that we want to have child labor laws and elder abuse laws and that we don’t throw children into debtors’ prison (as used to be the case) for their parents’ financial failings. It **matters** that the bodies of our homeless brothers and sisters are hugely at-risk from disease, hunger, and sexual assault.

Do you begin to see Paul’s point? And he ties it all together with that famous line: “We who are many, are one body in Christ, and individually we are members one of another.” *We are members one of another.* So very much in our current culture denies that this is the case. Too many of the people tell us instead that some people – immigrants, foreigners, women, Muslims, LGBTQ folks – matter less than we do, and, what’s more, too often we internalize and believe those things ourselves. “*We are members one of another.*” Like it or not, God has given us a world in which we along with seven-plus billion other people live interconnected with each other. Our challenge, says, Paul, is to use the gifts that each has been given to respect and upbuild and heal the hurts of the human family.

Now, all of this may sound overly earnest and joy-free. Maybe it sounds like obligation rather than opportunity. It’s not. You see, one of the oldest traditions

³https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Between_the_World_and_Me

attested to in scripture is that God wants to take delight in the creatures that God has made. God wants to enjoy human beings enjoying in and delighting in the gifts that they have been given. This can be seen from the first lines of the Book of Genesis where God created the first man and woman, giving them gifts and talents and opportunities, told them to make use of those gifts and talents, gave them bodies through which to enjoy one another, told them to use their gifts to make the world a better place, and then called the whole thing good. And, what's more, when we are able to in fact acknowledge and enjoy the gifts that God has given us, we will also, in turn, be more able to acknowledge and enjoy the gifts that God has given others. We will find ourselves less prone to be suspicious. We may find ourselves delightedly welcoming the new things that the future will bring, new ways of exercising the gifts we have been given, new ways to take joy in putting our bodies in service of the actions through which we indeed show our worship of God.

It's what the wonderful, jazzy, joyous song "*Many Gifts, One Spirit of Love*" is expressing. Will you stand and sing it with me now? Sing it with delight and joy and gusto? Chalice Praise, the purple songbook, number 151.